DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 422 399 TM 028 961

AUTHOR	Noble, Audrey J.; LeMahieu, Paul G.
TITLE	Stones in the Road: The Impact of Standards-Based Reform on Local Policy, Programs, and Practice.
PUB DATE	1997-00-00
NOTE	15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, CA, April 13-17, 1998).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Curriculum Development; *Educational Change; Educational Policy; Educational Theories; Elementary Secondary Education; *Policy Formation; Professional Development; *School Districts; *Standards; *State Programs; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	*Delaware; Reform Efforts

ABSTRACT

This research sought to determine and describe the impact of standards-based reform as a policy instrument by studying the ways in which state adoption of content standards affects local policy, programs, and practice. In 1992, the state of Delaware embarked on a plan to improve its public schools. While the state worked at determining what students should know and be able to do and how to tell when they have accomplished this task, local districts and teachers were left to determine the best ways to enhance student learning. The focus of this research was to provide insight into the ways in which Delaware school districts are responding to state content standards and how the standards have influenced policy and practice in curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development. Eight of the state's 19 school districts served as sites for this study. Data came from interviews and document reviews. The initial analysis generated case data specific to each of the identified orienting variables, and then variable-ordered descriptive matrices were developed to examine the data derived from each individual site by the focusing variable (such as role of learning theory or equity). Five major themes were synthesized from the analysis of data: (1) a lack of understanding of the conceptual orientation of the standards; (2) the place of a theory of knowledge and learning; (3) equity and the expectation that Delaware's standards apply to all students; (4) appropriate and effective professional development; and (5) interrelationships among curriculum, instruction, and assessment. A look at these school districts indicates that the districts with the greatest personnel resources are most likely to be involved in district-level efforts that consider and appreciate the complexities of school reform, but those districts that are most challenged by the state's standards-based reform are the very districts where leadership personnel are overburdened and overextended. The state's decision to remain neutral on the issue of learning theory, which was politically expedient in that it derailed much opposition, has given the districts extra problems to resolve. (SLD)

"STONES IN THE ROAD: THE IMPACT OF STANDARDS-BASED REFORM ON LOCAL POLICY, PROGRAMS AND PRACTICE"

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Audrey Noble

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Audrey J. Noble, Ph.D.
Paul G. LeMahieu, Ph.D.

University of Delaware

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

1

"Policy matters. It is important, not the least because it consists of texts which are sometimes acted on." - Beilherz, 1987

ED 422 399

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

This research seeks to determine and describe the impact of standards-based reform as a policy instrument – the ways in which state adoption of content standards affects local policy, programs, and practice. Five years ago the state of Delaware embarked on a plan to improve its public schools in much the same way as most states in the nation. In response to pressures triggered by discourse at the national level as well as demands from the state's most powerful corporate leaders, Delaware pursued a standards- and assessment-based educational reform initiative. By 1995, content standards had been written and approved in four major content areas: English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. In 1996, the American Federation of Teachers had judged some of these efforts as "exemplary." The Delaware State Testing Program is scheduled for implementation in the 1997-98 school year. The state Superintendent's education policy advisor depicted the initiative as one "based on the conviction that to significantly improve our schools we must answer three apparently simple but actually complex and interconnected questions: One, what is it that all students must know and be able to do? Two, how will we know when students have accomplished the task? And, three, what are the best ways to enhance student learning?" (Hicks, 1992).

While the state worked at answering questions one and two, the local districts and the teachers there were left to respond to the third. They are faced with the challenge of making the standards real, that is, translating them into teachable curriculum and all that that entails. Consequently, the focus of this research was to provide insight into the ways that Delaware school districts are initially responding to the state Content Standards and to examine how the standards have influenced district level policy and practice in the areas of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development.

TM028961

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This interpretive study followed a model of critical policy analysis forwarded by Stephen Ball and Martin Rein. Ball (1994) asserted that essential to the analysis of any policy is the need "to examine the order of reform and the relationship of reform to existing patterns of social inequality" (p.3). Rein (1976) also believed that the analyst must approach social, in this case, educational policy as a critic, realizing that all interventions may be regarded as ways of doing one thing and, at the same time, forsaking some other action. Since policy making is an untidy process, one group's solution often becomes another group's problems (Lindblom, 1980). Therefore, a study of policy in practice needs to examine the consequences of what may appear as widely shared principles.

The principles inherent in the Delaware State Content Standards were embraced by education stakeholders throughout the state and praised by many expert reformers both internal and external to Delaware. The next logical step, aligning curriculum and practice at the local level to the state content standards, appeared to many to be a straightforward task. However, the results uncovered by this study revealed not only its complexity, but many of the inequities inherent, but frequently ignored in the process. The intent of this research was not only to portray local interpretations and reactions to the standards but also to confront the state's policymakers with the results of mandating an action without addressing the unevenness of the playing field.

METHODS/ DATA SOURCES

Eight of Delaware's 19 schools districts served as sites for this study with representation based on size, locality, demographics, and fiscal resources. The data collection process included two primary sources of data, interviews and documents, gathered from district personnel who were directly responsible for curriculum and professional development activities. Multiple forms of data analysis were used for both the interview and document data collected. Preliminary analyses, conducted by members of the interviewing teams, entailed the completion of a set of rubrics and rating scales based on the focusing components of the study:

- the process of curriculum development, the role of learning theories,
- the approaches toward curriculum integration,
- the provision and quality of professional development,
- the role of assessment, and,
- considerations regarding opportunity to learn.

The initial analysis activity generated case data specific to each of the orienting variables outlined above. Each of the cross-case data analyses that followed were designed to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Next, variable-ordered descriptive matrices were developed to examine the data derived from each individual site by focusing variable, that is role of learning theory, equity, etc. Coding of interview and document data within the variable-oriented matrices led to the next level of analysis that yielded a within-site coding matrix. A cross-site coding procedure was then used to generate the findings as delineated in the report. The analysis format followed Miles & Huberman (1984).

FINDINGS

Five major themes were synthesized from the analysis of data. They include:

1) A Lack of Understanding of the Conceptual Orientation of the Standards

Beyond the explicit rendering of goals and objectives for individuals, Delaware's content standards represent a fundamental shift from a topical orientation for curriculum to a conceptual one. That is, the standards focus on fundamental and enduring concepts with topics being a curricular determination chosen to convey or illustrate those important concepts. They also represent a very basic shift in the way curriculum should be conceived. Our study revealed that this understanding is not prevalent and the curricular implications of this understanding are not much attended to throughout the state. We found varied responses to the question,

How are schools aligning their local curricula with the Delaware State Content Standards?

Standards-based education reform in Delaware is predicated on content standards and performance indicators[1] that delineate what Delaware students should know and be able to do in each of the disciplines. These standards and indicators have been developed by the state's Curriculum Framework Commissions. The responsibility for curriculum alignment belongs to the local school districts. A goal of this research was to examine how districts are responding to this charge. All of the districts involved in the study had initiated curriculum alignment activity. The dilemmas surfaced when one examines the type of progress that has been made. We found that districts have defined the task in varied fashions and have consequently pursued it in different ways.

While they differed in many ways, one commonality was that the districts' procedures all fostered high levels of participation among their teachers. Each of the districts saw value in teacher involvement. All acknowledged that any proposed change in instruction generated from curriculum development would be directly affected by the level of teachers' participation in the process and their ownership of the outcome.

We found that three (3) different models characterize the curriculum alignment activities being conducted in the school districts. Many curriculum directors used the phrases "gap analysis" or "discrepancy analysis" to describe their activities, however closer examination revealed that this term, in regards to process and outcome, had different meanings in different settings.

<u>The 'What's Missing From This Picture?' Model of Curriculum Alignment.</u>

This model of curriculum alignment predominantly entails districts comparing their own local instructional activities to the state standards, determining what is missing, and then filling the 'gap.' This model typically prevailed in districts that, for all intents and purposes, had no local

[1] References to content standards are limited to those completed in English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies.

curriculum prior to the release of the state standards. The approach was usually driven by the textbook adoption cycles, therefore, alignment activities were planned annually, one content area at a time in preparation for textbook and instructional materials purchases to be made at the end of the year. The general alignment process involved these steps:

1) Outline the state standards;
2) Find where the standard (topic) is currently taught in the instructional program;
3) Find the 'gaps' (i.e., what isn't 'covered').

Gaps were not necessarily filled in the same ways. The most common approach was to purchase additional instructional materials and textbooks for specific courses or grade levels. Consequently, some committee members continued to see the process as one of textbook selection. In addition to purchasing texts and materials to fill the gaps, some districts saw the need to write additional curriculum or "skills". Some of these efforts involved the development of learning goals along with suggested instructional activities and forms of assessment.

<u>The 'Where Does It Fit?' Model of Curriculum Alignment.</u>

One important difference between this and the former model, is that the districts' local curriculum served as the basis of the comparison activity. In other words, they looked at their own curriculum first and then determined how the state standards fit in. These districts also described their processes as a 'gap or discrepancy analysis.' Having had their own curriculum prior to the release of the state content standards, these districts followed this plan to align their curriculum.

1) Delineate the district curriculum by content area;
2) Examine the state standards and find where they are covered;
3) Determine which standards are not addressed; this is the 'gap.'

This process of curriculum alignment, in some cases, revealed little more than a cut-and-paste exercise where statements from the state standards documents were inserted into statements of local curriculum. On determining which state standards were not addressed, districts varied in their responses. One district is in the process of writing additional instructional units that are piloted by classroom teachers who give feed back to the curriculum committee as to how well they believe the unit addresses the standard. Based on their evaluation, the committee decides whether or not to add the activity to the local curriculum. Other responses included adding courses, changing course sequence, requesting state waivers, and ignoring the standard. Indicative of this perspective, one director stated,

> *"I'm willing to go along with state standards if I see value and they fit in to the curriculum and they meet our mission."*

The 'How Should It Be?' Model of Curriculum Alignment.

A third interpretation of the curriculum alignment process was found in a small number of the participating districts. This process was also described as a 'gap analysis.' However, these districts ascertained the gap through very different procedures than those utilized in the first two models. Their process involved:

1) Determine the ideal. Although the districts used different approaches, they initially focused on a single content area and decided what students should know and be able to do as defined though an examination of national standards, Delaware state standards, and research on how children best learn that content.
2) Determine what and how teachers are currently teaching. Through teacher committee and/or classroom observation, decisions are made about what is happening in the classroom.
3) Define the gap. The gap is the difference between the proposed ideals and current state of classroom practice.

In response to the gaps determined by those who use this model of curriculum alignment, many activities ensued. Curriculum writing included the development of instructional strategies and classroom assessments. New curriculum was piloted. Consultants were utilized to provide technical assistance in the development of curriculum. New materials, texts, and technology provided further resources to fill the gap. Professional development around the new instructional strategies was provided for both teachers and the administrators who evaluate them. Use of teacher- to-teacher mentoring is highly valued and commonly utilized.

By examining the different approaches that educators chose to align their local curriculum, we were able to come to see how, through this process, they were making sense of the relationship between standards and curriculum. The examination ultimately revealed a limited understanding of the conceptual underpinnings of the content standards. The first two models showed that as many educators reduced this process to a matching game, the essence of the standards was lost to them. Concepts were reduced to topics, units, and lessons. Instead of expanded and deepened understandings, their actions implied a narrowing and simplification of the standards, diminishing their conceptual orientation to a catalogue of topics.

2) *The Place of a "Theory of Knowledge and Learning"*

Historically, standards-based reform has had two very different meanings to each of two sets of actors. To curriculum and instructional specialists reform implies a view of practice with implications for the nature of instruction and learning as well as implications for content. For political and many educational leaders standards-based reform speaks only to the expectations (the standards) and the determination and recognition of accomplishment (assessment and accountability). This second group of individuals are completely neutral, albeit uninformed, with regard to how (much less how best) to achieve those standards. This schism is manifest throughout the state. The Department of Education has assiduously avoided any declaration or

support of a particular theory of learning (and therefore instructional practice) attendant to its standards. However, there is growing evidence that this neutral position is being translated by multiple players within districts resulting in some places as a hodgepodge of views of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Some of these interpretations surfaced as we focused on the question,

What place do theories of how children learn have in the curriculum alignment process?

The research examined the role that learning theories had in the district's curriculum alignment and other related activities such as professional development and assessment. We found that, in half of the districts, discussions about how children learn was not a part of the curriculum alignment process. The curriculum directors stated that discussions about learning theory and its implications for curriculum development were not typical.

> *"Not in a formal sense that we would sit down and have discussions or have people talk about how students learn."*

> *"That's a piece that I'm finding the most need (for) right now. We've been in this for a long time in terms of the work we did before the standards and getting our curriculum aligned with the standards. But the piece I think we haven't dug into is the student learning..."*

Although discussion of learning theories may not have played an explicit role in the curriculum alignment process, its implicit manifestations surfaced in key areas, such as conflicts over ability grouping, textbook selection, teacher evaluation, and professional development topics.

However, in a small number of districts, discussions about learning theory played a central role in the curriculum alignment process.

> *"We have an entire curriculum instruction management system. It starts with pulling together representatives from every grade, subject, including special ed., gifted and talent, and regular ed. That group studies first what children should know, what the research has said about how children learn those things..."*

> *"Definitely. In fact before we even started... we had the prerequisite of the constructivist courses, some training in that area. That's been our beginning approach. Constructivist ideas have been the platform on which all of our work has been built."*

> *"We bring in consultants to do a lot of the inservice. They'll talk about best practice in terms of learning styles-- how children learn best and the kinds of information that we have now concerning the brain and learning."*

Based on multi-rater analyses of the data gathered through interviews and documents, we examined whether traditional or constructivist learning theory predominated and/or whether both views existed. Based on the compilation of a series of indicators, we found that in all but one case, both theories of learning influenced the development of curriculum, assessment, professional development, and textbook selection. At four sites, learner-centered or constructivist theory predominated along with some evidence of traditional, skilled-oriented theory. In three sites, traditional theory predominated with evidence of some constructivist practices. One case analysis revealed a predominant orientation toward constructivist principles of learning.

Consequently, as the state straddles the political fences conflicting messages are sent to curriculum directors and teachers who must ultimately make sense of it all. Our concerns are that such neutral positions, while politically expedient, can only undermine authentic improvement and that the reform cannot succeed without a straightforward and appropriate treatment of the implications that the standards hold for instruction.

3) *Equity and the Expectation that Delaware's Standards Apply to All Students*

Discussion about issues of equity and students' equal opportunity to learn colors much of the national debate about standards-based reform. An underlying assumption and one that is clearly stated in each of the Delaware State Content Standards documents is "the principle that all students can learn and consequently will be held to high academic expectations of knowledge and performance." Nonetheless, the phrase "equity and excellence for all" has developed a bumper sticker connotation. In doing so it has been stripped of much of the power of its message. Simply put, there is ample evidence that many do not believe that all children can learn to the high levels of performance implied in the standards. Moreover, many denigrate and dismiss the proposition that "all kids can learn" with examples of a very few youngsters with profound needs. A second aspect of the equity challenge is that even where there is a moral philosophic commitment to the prospect of all kids learning, the substantive knowledge of how to promote that is often lacking. This manifests itself in a lack of diversification of curricular materials and instructional approaches as might enable appropriate adaptation and modification to meet the unique needs of individual students in an increasingly diverse student population. The following illustrates dimensions of educators' responses to the research question,

Do they believe that all students can learn?

A common trend was the provision of additional instructional time for students with special learning needs. After school, summer, and Saturday programs were common. Alternative models of instruction, however, were not as widespread. Half of the districts actively promoted non-traditional modeling including teaming, individual mentoring, alternative schools, and multiple intelligences. Many of the districts had special educators as members of the curriculum development committees. Professional development workshops on diversity training was a strategy used by many districts. Textbook selection criteria frequently incorporated statements as "illustrates culturally sensitive instruction."

Notwithstanding the mechanisms that many districts had put into place to address the issue, there were many indicators drawn from the interview and document analyses that suggested that the premise that "all students can learn" is not well rooted in educators' belief systems. Some interpreted the principle as follows:

> *"I don't know that all children can meet all the standards. I don't know that any adult that wrote the standards could meet all the standards."*
>
> *"I think all students can meet higher expectations. We don't push higher standards. It's higher expectations."*
>
> *"All students can learn is like all fish can swim."*
> *[implied hollowness of the statement]*

The review of curriculum documents, in some cases, provided a clearer idea of how districts actually acted on this principle. Some analyses revealed a common tendency toward direct instructional models for students in special education classes. In addition, one curriculum director stated that the district

> *"leans toward learner-centered instruction, however, we are trying to be very balanced in our approach. Especially with literacy, for example, to not go to a just open-ended type of approach because we know that doesn't work. Especially with our learners, we have almost 50% poor population here."*

This implication, that learner-centered instruction is less effective with low SES students, is not uncommon. There are many studies that illustrate that basic skills instructional models are frequently used in schools with high percentages of poor and/or minority students. An assumption can be derived from this practice that teachers believe that these students are less able to positively respond to or benefit from more complex instructional models.

Many acknowledged their frustration in regards to how to appropriately address this issue.

> *"In our curriculum we have not said anything about diverse learners, we don't have anything in writing about that...We've not addressed that very well."*
>
> *"...diverse learning styles? That's another major deficiency that we need to address. We haven't dealt with that at all. It's always been there. It's always been an issue in trying to help all kids."*
>
> *"I think we have a lot of work to do, quite frankly, and it's very*

hard to get a handle on how to do it. It's something that I think I'm struggling with."

"I do not believe that the majority of teachers in (district) or the majority of teachers in Delaware believe that statement. (all kids can learn). Any time we're dealing with the belief systems, we're in for trouble and a struggle. With saying that, we have done the diversity training because I believe all children can achieve a high standard. Some people didn't like that because they don't think African-American children can learn. They don't think special education children can learn. They don't think IQs can change. It's all written in stone."

The above comments indicate that educators are well aware that providing equal opportunity for students to learn is a complex undertaking. It will take much more than the provision of additional instructional time or the assignment of more paraprofessionals to shake loose belief systems. While this issue presents the greatest challenge to those who hope to significantly improve the quality of education, it is also the one issue that cannot be ignored for it permeates everything else within the system. In sum, there is a need for a clearer message about what is meant by the assertion "all kids can learn." There is a need for educators to be exposed to experiences and avenues through which to challenge beliefs to the contrary. Consequently, there is a need to support professionals as they learn how to best help a diverse student population to learn to high standards.

4) *Appropriate and Effective Professional Development*

Our research revealed that there is a lack of appropriately focused and properly designed professional development. The gaps that occurred between current practice and a desired state of affairs in professional development arose in two areas. The first was a lack of attention to the content and disciplinary knowledge of instructional professionals. This hinders the efficacy of professional development in addressing the content needs of teachers laboring to address the standards. The second shortcoming was the lack of attention to what is known about adult learning and its implications for effective professional development in the design, implementation, and delivery of professional development activity. Much of what exists perpetuates the traditional one-shot and unfocused approaches of the past. We came to these conclusions as we examined the question,

How are school districts making the connection between curriculum and instruction?

The professional development opportunities that a district offers its teachers are direct reflections of what a district values and how it believes improvement can be brought about. We gathered data regarding the districts' professional development programs and compared them to a subset

of items from the "Elements of Quality Professional Development"[2]. In particular, we examined whether the activities were focused on the Content Standards and whether the programs were of an ongoing and sustained nature.

Our review of district's professional development programs included not only those offerings provided by the district directly, but also a review of outside professional development pursued by district teachers. While this latter form of data was not available from all districts, it did inform our thinking in regards to some and was therefore included. We found that many district professional development programs could be described as being focused on state Content Standards. Topics varied from district to district as most programs were based on assessed teacher needs and many utilized local personnel to provide training.

Even though many districts offered professional development around the state content standards, for the most part, very few efforts could be described as more than one-shot offerings. With the exception of one district, professional development activities were typically of limited scope and duration. There were two notable exceptions—the state's K-8 science initiative funded by the National Science Foundation and the state's Teacher-to-Teacher Cadre, a mentoring-based model of professional development.

Educators noted the value of models of professional development that encouraged teachers to share their expertise with one another.

> *"We do as much as we can after school, in the sense of teachers having conversations, coming together to share what's successful..."*
>
> *"The kinds of sessions teachers are always asking for are opportunities to share their experiences and successes- learn from others in similar situations."*

Most of the districts offered professional development around topics that addressed the state content standards. However, while their grasp of content reflected an understanding of teachers' needs, the processes by which the content was shared, typically resembled traditional, one-shot workshops and seminars. Consequently, very few of the opportunities offered to teachers have the capacity to foster deep conceptual understanding, a prerequisite to their growth as educators.

5) *Interrelationships among curriculum, instruction, and assessment*

Many of those interviewed in this research revealed a framework for thinking about curriculum, instruction and assessment that separates these various parts, each from the other. There were frequent disconnects between the thinking about curriculum and instruction and the perceived

---

[2] Adapted from P. LeMahieu, P. Roy, & H. Foss: Elements of Quality Professional Development, University of Delaware and Delaware Department of Public Instruction.

role of assessment. The result is a lack of consistency and coherence across these elements of learning that ideally should be inextricably intertwined. Evidence suggested forms of pedagogy that could not optimally support curriculum (or the standards) and approaches to assessment that were more likely to interfere than to advance the goals of curriculum and assessment. We generated these conclusions as we explored the question,

How are districts linking standards and assessment?

As the Delaware school districts await the full implementation of the Delaware State Testing Program, they have chosen various paths for their own local assessment programs. An examination of the district level assessments, their forms and their uses, revealed much about how districts view assessment and its role in education reform.

Educators held diverse opinions regarding the role assessment plays in changing instruction; their views ranged from beliefs that assessment could effect genuine change to the perspective that testing has no effect whatsoever on the world of the classroom.

> *"the only piece that is really driving people to change right now is our internal assessments. And I can't see anything else because there seems to be such a resistance to change from traditionally teaching kids the operational things to having kids do the problem solving ..."*

> *"I don't know how we use them. We get them the year after and we send them back to the previous years' and current year's teachers... The numbers don't mean diddly..."*

Some educators saw value in their local assessment programs as a means to inform classroom instruction. However, they did not view assessment as a means to genuine instructional change but rather as a way to prepare teachers for the upcoming state tests.

> *" we did get out the performance tasks that were given to us and have had teachers develop some performance assessments... They were taught how to score it... we just thought it was a really good experience for them to get a grip on what this whole thing was all about... We have not had a test that teachers have bought in to."*

One ideal of standards-based reform promotes the interconnectedness of standards and assessment. Few educators in our study saw this relationship as anything more than distinct and separate elements of school activity. Some saw assessment as potentially forcing change, especially among those teachers who have been resistant.

This study was conducted at the request of the Delaware State Board of Education. Thus the findings were initially presented as recommendations to the state to inform the agenda of the

Delaware Department of Education. They have also been discussed with other stakeholder groups including the district superintendents, state curriculum supervisors, and individual school districts. It is also serving as the basis of an ongoing professional development program for the state's curriculum cadre.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Ball (1994) asserted that essential to the analysis of any policy is the need "to examine the order of reform and the relationship of reform to existing patterns of social inequality" (p.3).

Delaware, while a small state, has highly diversified educational and social communities. From affluent communities that boast more Ph.D.s per square mile than any other place in the U.S. to agricultural communities with predominantly transient residents, values and ways of life vary as much as in any large state in the nation. However, the state's education reform efforts often mask or ignore this diversity. The school districts are frequently seen as a singular entity, promoting the assumption that each has equal capacity to respond to the state's mandates. However, while the per pupil expenditures in the state, for the most part, make the districts appear similar in their financial capacity, other inequalities seem to have a profound impact on a district's ability to effectively respond to the charges of the state. An easily perceptible example of this inequality revealed itself in this study. We found the simple formula that those districts with greater personnel resources, particularly those with powerful leadership and depth of talent, are the most likely to be involved in district level efforts that tend toward thoughtfulness and appreciation for the complexities implied by standards-based reform. They proactively seek solutions. They value educational research. They are typically, but not always, supported by more affluent communities that value education. They were always involved in and remain committed to the process of self-improvement. They seek out talent, new ideas, and question the status quo. They perpetrate their own growth and believe in their capacity to change. They are risk-takers and believe in the power of collaboration over competition.

Whereas, those districts that are most challenged by the state's standards-based reform efforts are those where leadership personnel are overburdened and overextended. They lack the depth of talent to successfully address all the responsibilities foisted upon them by the reform. They are frequently distracted by challenges from ill- or little-informed communities. They are reactive and seek quick-fixes. They are often dependent upon the state to provide the answers and directions on how to proceed. They are more likely than not to be situated in poorer, rural or small town communities.

The social inequality that Ball refers to is easily seen in the arena of standards-based reform. The implementation tasks of curriculum alignment, professional development, and the rest are equally as large and challenging and have no regard for a school district's size or depth of talent. State education policy that ignores the different capacities of districts continues to exacerbate this inequality.

Moreover, equity issues have taken the sideline in Delaware's standards-based reform efforts as implementation proceeds. Our study revealed that "equity and excellence for all" have become hollow mantras. While initially part of the language of the reform's vision, the principles have been lost in interpretation. Instead of providing the impetus to challenge assumptions and foster new approaches, they have become slogans and, for some, topics of ridicule. A fundamental tenet of standards-based reform is that all students should be educated to and be able to reach high standards. It challenges the assumptions built into the normal-curve mentality, i.e., there will always be those who perform above and below average. These assumptions have typically plagued disadvantaged groups in our educational system. To change such well-accepted beliefs is no easy challenge. It takes far more than slogans. The state leadership has backed away from this challenge and the task has been left to the districts. Again, the varying degrees of capacity and understanding have manifested themselves in local policies, programs, and classroom practice; few represent conscientious efforts embracing the principle that "all kids can learn." States involved in reform initiatives must clearly explore those deeply ingrained and often unexamined assumptions that are incompatible with the goals and visions of standards- based reform. Without challenging and changing these contradictory beliefs, the promise of educational improvement that benefits all children will be too easily forgotten.

Rein (1976) believed that the analyst must approach social, in this case, educational policy as a critic, realizing that all interventions may be regarded as ways of doing one thing and, at the same time, forsaking some other action. Since policy making is an untidy process, one group's solution often becomes another group's problems (Lindblom, 1980).

The state's decision to remain neutral on the issue of learning theory, whether or not intentional, had the initial effect of generating support from groups who typically were adversarial, i.e., those who support direct instruction and those who believe in constructivist learning approaches. These differences frequently fell out along political and community lines as well. The state's solution, while politically expedient, in that it effectively side-stepped the question, now has become the districts' problem. Now districts struggle with community groups and teachers who hold different views as they make decisions in how to align their local curriculum to the state content standards. In some cases, whether intentionally or out of lack of cognizance of the dilemma, some districts are creating curriculum models that embrace both visions of learning. Then the problem of making sense of the curriculum is passed on to the classroom teacher as he/she struggles to interpret curriculum. One group's solution readily became another group's problem. This predicament remains salient as long as policymakers choose political expediency over the promotion of educationally-sound actions.

Delaware has been described by some as a "pathfinder" state in education reform. Much of what it finds can serve as lessons to those states pursuing similar courses. We believe that our research has illuminated the complexity of what is involved in gaining understanding of the conceptual. It revealed a prevalence of superficial responses to issues of equity. It exposed the power of human resources and its inevitable impact upon outcomes. It uncovered the dangers of allowing political expedience to prevail over sound educational judgment. As such, this study offers much to use to those serving as architects or leaders of the most prevalent approach to education reform in the nation today.

REFERENCES

American Federation of Teachers (1996). *Making standards matter 1996.* Item No. 265. Washington, DC.

Ball, S. (1994). *Education reform: A critical and post-structural approach.* Buckingham, England: Open University Press.

Beilharz, P. (1987). "Reading politics: Social theory and social policy." *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Sociology,* 23(3), 388-406.

Hicks, L. (1992). *New directions for education in Delaware*. Department of Public Instruction, Dover, DE.

Lindblom, C. E. (1980). *The policy-making process,* 2nd edition. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Miles, M., & Huberman, A. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis.* Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage Publications.

Rein, M. (1976). *Social science and public policy.* Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd.